

Zonolite not just a Libby problem

It's time to look beyond Libby in dealing with the hazards of asbestos. The problem's been locked in the attic long enough. Literally.

Called "Ground Zero" for asbestos contamination, Libby became a federal Superfund cleanup site last year.

As Tribune reporter Sonja Lee detailed in an eight-page special report last week, the fallout from Libby spreads through Montana and across the country.

That's because contaminated ore mined at Libby was shipped by rail to plants around the country, including Robinson Insulation in Great Falls.

There, workers processed the vermiculite into various products, including insulation known as Zonolite.

Lee reported that a

number of former Robinson employees are dead or suffer from asbestos-related lung disease.

More shocking is that in several cases their wives or children — exposed at home to the dust from the workers' clothes — also are ill.

Some sued W.R. Grace, owner of the Libby mine, for not disclosing that the vermiculite was tainted.

Grace disputes vermiculite is unsafe, but the company is settling most lawsuits and is paying some health-care costs in Libby.

Now we learn that repercussions from Libby hit much closer to home — in fact sometimes in our homes.

About a third of the houses in Great Falls — and presumably north-central Montana — were built in the days when

Zonolite commonly was used for insulation.

That means thousands of attics are packed with material that could be contaminated with asbestos.

Left undisturbed, asbestos is not a threat. And that's a point that can't be made strongly enough to avoid unnecessary panic.

But if it becomes airborne, the particles can be inhaled, potentially causing problems.

Most homeowners aren't at risk — so long as they don't use the attic space for storage and there's no sign that the insulation is working its way through cracks and fixtures.

But when insulation is being disturbed or is showing signs of leaking, home and business owners should get it tested to see if it contains asbestos. If it does, they

face a tough choice: Live with the risk, or pay thousands of dollars to remove it.

Libby taught us that cleaning up asbestos is an expensive, time-consuming pursuit.

Given the potential that millions of homes and businesses across the country contain contaminated insulation, it's not realistic to expect government to step in and cover all the costs of removing it.

But right now there's no financial help, and that must change. In cases where it's not safe to leave the insulation in place, building owners need assistance.

That could come in the form of tax credits for those who have asbestos removed. Or a revolving fund could provide interest-free loans for the job. Or there could be a combination of the two.

Yes, that means taxpayers will take some of the hit. But the alternative isn't pretty: homeowners who risk their family's health and the value of their main asset because they can't afford a cleanup project.

It was heartening to see several Great Falls legislators at a public forum on the issue hosted by the Tribune last week. We hope they carry the message to Helena that not only Libby needs help.

Montana's congressional delegation should start a similar dialogue in Washington.

Lots of attention justifiably has focused on Ground Zero. Now we must deal with the fallout from Libby — fallout much closer to home.

(Coming Monday: Montana workers are put at unnecessary risk from asbestos exposure.)

OUR OPINION